1975

Called Back

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CALLED BACK

Pat Ikeda
Honors Project
Creative Writing
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To Louise and Fanny Norcross
(May 14, 1886, the day before her death)

Little Cousins, -- Called back.

Emily

PREFACE

A couple months ago I ran into Stuart Friebert. I told him I felt like writing something new and different. He said, "That's fine, but don't be afraid to go back again and again to the things you know best." And, looking back, I can see how I've felt a steady gravitational pull toward getting my family history in order, finding my beginnings, rediscovering the "ordinary." I believe that Roethke was right: in order to go forward, we must go backward.

Pat Ikeda
April, 1975

SETTLING

They left Japan and came to Colorado, got land. Typhoid came down the mountain stream, they drove a truck to Indiana, the black cast-iron pans swinging from the sides. A stillborn child, a hard winter. And the house so cold the water froze in the pitchers at night.

Sunlight in the catalpa leaves, breeze through the asparagus fronds. My grandmother puts on her bonnet, in the garden the heat rises around her. I stand by the window, waiting for the hummingbird, looking through a stack of brittle yellow magazines that open from the back.

A heavy maroon bathrobe, stiff and prickly, hanging beside my father's sport shirts. He takes it out, puts his finger through a moth hole, says : "This belonged to my uncle, the one who died in California in a concentration camp."

Down by the stream there's wild watercress and crawdads. The fields stretch out like the flank of a sleepy black sow, a redwing blackbird flashes low over the fence. Coming back, the row of maples my grandfather planted from seed to outlast him, and they did.

High wooden stools, the kitchen table covered with yellow oil-cloth. Empty glasses filled with chopsticks and silverware,

smell of mold under the linoleum. My grandmother sets out home-made jam and bread for us, fills an enamel basin with warm water to wash out her eyes.

Going home to his wife and daughter, driving the tractor home, my uncle was hit by a drunk and killed. My first funeral, I was very young. A big dark room, confused people and heavy odor. He was lying at one end, he looked enormous and frozen, flowers heaped on his chest.

My grandmother sleeps alone, and the mice rustle in her closet at night. The family spread out, and one son kept the Ikeda farm going. The barn is empty now, a few black potatoes send shoots all the way to the door, feeling out the light.

EARLY SNAPSHOTS OF MY PARENTS

1

She stands next to her first snow-man. In the background, dormitories. She left Hawaii and came to Indiana. Probably her first winter coat--it's long and black, she's wearing a little black hat, smiling. The carrot stuck in the snow-man's face is crooked, he has rocks for teeth.

2

He hasn't changed much. He's up to his knees, next to a willow. Bermuda shorts, T-shirt, and styrofoam Safari hat. But how can it be styrofoam? His mouth is open, a fishing rod seems ready to fall out of his left hand. Look closer: a white light is rising. His T-shirt is glowing, his face.

NEIGHBORS IN THE TRAILER PARK

You never knew much about them, except sometimes one of the Carters would bring over some blackberries, and hang around until Mom made a pie and said "Do you want some"of course. Because he said that all they were eating was cornbread and baked beans, and then he'd notice his fly was open, he'd turn red and she'd have to give him another piece. All you'd hear was the buzz of cicadas out back. It was an old apple orchard. The green ones were sour and the red ones were wormy, unpruned branches hanging down to the grass. Everyone had a name for a favorite climbing tree, except I was always afraid, sat under the trailer playing with the cats.

The rule was, no pets. But people were always dumping kittens off near the road, and some got killed and some wandered around the trailers, sleeping in boxes left by the garbage. Their eyes were always infected, ribs showing, but if you fed them stale bread in milk they would play, chasing a string, rubbing around your legs, washing their faces. Mom always gave me warm water with borax in it and cotton swabs to wash out their eyes, but she said we couldn't keep them. My brother and I used to follow them under trailers where they dug holes in the sand, lowered their haunches, and closed their eyes. It was a mystery. What does it look like because they always cover it up.

The Richmonds lived next door in a salmon colored trailer. Before them, the Magrells. But they seemed the same to me, big families

from West Virginia buying clothes at bargain basements and cheap shoes and the father coming home drunk late Friday night. Their trailer smelled. I didn't like the parents, but the children drank Orange Crush or grape soda from the machines down by the office, and made jewelry out of fried marbles. "They climb trees like monkeys," said my father.

Mary Jane on the corner was retarded, and tore up her dolls. She tore up my sister's dolls, too. It was hard to understand what she said, only her mother was good at it.

My brother played with Mike. Lots of boys went to his trailer all the time, and they planned camping trips, sleeping out in the orchard and eating cans of Treat, which was cheaper than Spam, taking along old bayonets from the Army Navy surplus store, and building fires. Mike had a greasy ducktail. He told me that President Kennedy was dead one day when I came home from school.

I liked to go do the wash with Mom on Saturdays. The machines were in a white building in the center of the park: washing machines, drying machines, and the black and silver ones that spun the clothes around and took out the water by centrifugal force. Some always had out of order signs taped to them. Big balls of lint in the corners, a smell of Chlorox and detergent. I'd help Mom put the washed clothes through the wringers, being careful not to get my fingers caught, and she'd let me put the nickels and dimes into the machines. On sunny days she would hang up the sheets

on the lines near the office, the warm wind snapping them around her as she took clothes pins out of her mouth to pin up the lengths of wet cloth. Once I stuck around and picked all the dandelions I could carry, and gave them to her when she was done. She put them in a vase, even though she had hayfever. But most times I would walk to the office to see if Denny was there, reading Sunset House shop-by-mail magazines that advertised golf tees shaped like women's legs, tiny ice trays for cocktails, and blackhead removers. He had the key to the pop machines, and we'd open one, then sit down with bottles of pop and look through the magazines for hours, item by item. There was a huge flying fish, bright blue and silver, on the wall. His brother had caught it in Florida.

The old man near the wash house lived by himself in a big red trailer and went out into the orchard and picked mushrooms. My father admired him for that -- "You never know which ones are poisonous," he said. I think the man's name was Chuck, but it didn't matter. He had no family, never came outside, but bought Girl Scout cookies and band candy if I got up the courage to knock on his door.

The Longs lived in a very small, old trailer. He was a big blond man, she was a tiny war bride from Japan. Their daughter once told me that she slept with her bra on, and never slept with a pillow. "It's good for you," she said. Her name was Shirley, but I never talked with her much. Rick, too. He was always sullen, went into the Navy and did secret intelligence work near

Cuba. But my brother and I played with Larry, who was nearer our age, and once at Christmas Larry gave me a ring with a lavender stone because his girlfriend at school didn't want it. The stone fell out, but Dad pasted it back in for me with Elmer's glue. The best thing about the Longs was that they had a movie projector, and once Mr. Long got an old Tarzan movie somewhere and invited everyone over. We sat in the dark trailer and watched Tarzan silently fighting alligators and swinging on vines through the jungle. "I'll run it backwards," Mr. Long said, and Tarzan came out of the jungle river feet first and flew backward through the air, landing perfectly poised on a high cliff. We shouted for more. He ran it backward twice.

But it was the Carters who attracted the most attention. They were always fighting and throwing pots and knives around, getting eviction notices, not caring. Mrs. Carter called in the police one day, she said that the night before she'd seen a flying saucer land on the edge of the park. The police came out and cordoned off the area, because there might be radiation. She swore that she'd seen it, but she was probably drunk. There was a small article in the local newspaper.

Her oldest son, Jim,looked like an ape, big half moons of perspiration soaking through his T-shirts at the armpits. He was the only one who climbed the tree when a swarm of bees came into the park and landed on a tree in Mary Jane's yard. The buzzing filled the air, and everyone stood around with their

mouths open, mothers holding on tight to their children's hands. The branch had grown a shivering black cluster of bees. Somewhere in the middle was the queen bee, Dad told me. Bee overpopulation, so somehow a second queen is born, and half of the hive migrates. This was better than reading a book in school! Jim Carter put on an army jacket and work gloves and climbed up into the tree and began sawing at the branch. What if he gets stung to death? I thought. His mother in curlers was crying. Everyone in the trailer park was looking up at Jim Carter. "Clear out, clear out!" he shouted, and the bees and the branch crashed down into Mary Jane's yard.

A TRAPPING STORY

The opossum has been walking around very slowly since the time of the dinosaurs. They are stupid, you can't feel much when they get killed on the road. In the middle of winter we saw one eating our dog's feces in the yard. He came again at night and pressed his face against the glass doors. We put out a plate of scrambled eggs and cellophane rims from slices of bologna. He ate the food and went away. We saw only three legs. In the spring our neighbor's garden was eaten by a woodchuck, my brother set a trap up by their woodpile. The neighbor lady stuck a rifle out the window and took pot-shots at the woodchuck. We called her Annie Oakley. She called the woodchuck bad names. My brother checked his trap and found another opossum leg. We didn't know if it was the same opossum because how did it walk away on two legs? The woodchuck stayed away from the trap and ate all the woman's string beans.

CHESAPEAKE BAY

1

I stand in the sun, close my eyes. Small insect noises prick the red light behind my eyelids. I'm not sure where I am.

People walking by make hollows in the sand. Little dunes. Parabolas of shadow.

2

"This place must have been something ten years ago," my father says. We're driving through town, past flimsy beach houses and closed down bars. The painted belly-dancers peeling from the boards. Crepe myrtle and hydrangeas in the yards. Chesapeake Bay, hot spot, loud-mouthed couples, plenty of money. And a big building called "The Baths," with a railing around the upper balcony. People standing up there, towels tied around their waists, drinking beer.

3

Outside town, the Rose of Sharon blooms in the fields. I've never seen it before. Irish lullabyes my mother sang when I was little.

"Were you ever drunk?" my mother says suddenly, leaning toward me.

I clear my throat and look out over the bay. Only two girls walking. And two gulls circling, waiting for the fishing boat to come in.

4

The sand is dirty brown, smells bad. We fight depression. Action. Cutting pieces of string and tying the ends around chicken backs, sold in a package. Ripe meat, yellow and slimy.

"The crabs will love it," my father says. He's ordering the crabs and, because he's wearing his blue fishing cap and Arnold Palmer sport shirt, the crabs had better obey.

5

I find a place on the pier and sit down. Throw the bait into the water, lean back. Beneath me, a half-rotted eel turns slowly in the water, wedged between the stones. A party boat comes in to dock, big waves break against the pilings. All along the pier, people crabbing, ready with their nets.

TWO PIECES

I.

You can make it move. Watch! Sprinkle salt on the gills.
My father pulls sharply, a string of guts follows the hook.
Evening. Winter. The fish empty on the table.
Frost scratches the window, ticking like a clock.
Raw salted fish. He's provided our food, didn't shave today.
Piles fish heads on the newspaper, his fingers sticking
through the gills.
Washing slime off the scaler, washing off the knife.

II.

My mother in the living room, watching shadows move
across the wall. The edge of the minute shows. She
puts on her beige coat.
How can she wear it, it's so heavy.
When I tried it the arms touched the floor.
She ties her red scarf around her head.
My father and I stand near the door.
We can't stop her. She stops.
"Are you leaving?" I ask.
She reaches into her pocket, gives me a stick of gum.
She wipes my face. The gum is green and silver.
My father and I sit by the window and watch her move
slowly up the street. She stops under a light. She
stands in her shadow. She is another woman.

I COULD NEVER MURDER ANYONE

But what about those rabbits? Sure, I felt terrible when I found the first pair lying stiff on the chicken wire in the bottom of the hutch. Some weasel got them, you couldn't even find the wounds. But when those Flemish Giants began spawning litters in the straw, mating like lightning under impossible conditions! below zero weather! new generations eating Purina Rabbit Chow and fucking! seventeen rabbits where two had been, separated by a wall! -- what could we do except look up rabbit recipes in The Joy of Cooking, say yes when Dad gave us the knife? We took out two big ones we hadn't named, hit them with a board and cut their heads off. The black eyes hardened into beads, the floppy ears stiffened. Following Dad's instructions: "It slips off like a glove!" we pulled off the fur in one piece. No going back, slit the transparent bulging bellies, spilled the guts in greasy piles of gray and red. They smelled hot and bad. Not much blood. At the table, bowls of steaming brown meat. My brother and I recognized the smell, no one ate much.

NATALIE AND BOO-BOO

I.

You sewed candy corn all over Dorothy's coat and I was mad. I knocked over the roses in the white plastic pitcher when you had the bad dream. Giving back your presents, I made a formal speech, beginning with: We can still be friends. During the time I slept you went 90 m.p.h. and when I woke up we were 13 miles out of Breezewood. We walked all over town looking for your glasses and I said a squirrel probably stole them. You were depressed and drank a Bloody Mary out of an empty peanut butter jar. That put you right to sleep, my telling you all the things I had to do tomorrow. I set the alarm, but you came to dinner late. I wanted a bowl of chili at the truck stop. Come on now, you said, you're acting as bad as me. Maybe, I said, but the bus leaves at eight. You raised your eyes and looked as if you wanted to say something. Who taught you to snore so loud? you said. I got mad and read <u>The Golden Ass</u> translated by Robert Graves in bed.

II.

We watched the Lawrence Welk Show and ate clam dip and Fritos. On that particular ride, the autumn leaves were very beautiful. You dried your eyes, put on your sunglasses, and went to the theatre. This act is good, but not good enough, I said. That afternoon we stepped into the cloister and the cedar tree was immense. When we bought pumpkins, you asked the man the baseball scores. The tablecloths were checked and the milk came in Moo-Cow creamers. That

old man behind the counter could hardly move, but he served us steaming meatloaf dinners. Every night cats fight under my window and I listen for your car. You opened the fortune cookie and ran out of the room.

NOVEMBER 15, 1974

A pot of white mums freezing on the porch, the windows steamed up. I dig in my tea leaves and suck on a clove. You walk around the kitchen in a freshly ironed shirt, whistling. The dog grunts and turns. When I look out the window, the road is iced over. You put your wallet in your pocket, slap for car keys, say good-bye looking back through the slice of open door.

Lying inside, nearly asleep, I think I can rise from my body and walk through the empty streets. Snow is falling, heavy trucks drive through the main intersection all night and morning. I follow the bulldozer of sleep down the sideroads, your body makes one slow, warm turn toward me.

LOUD NOISES

He wakes up crying, I close the windows. What's wrong?

My job, nothing, I'm depressed, I'm sorry, he says, I'm frightened.

I say what of, notice how the windows rattle when a plane flies overhead. It's an old house, nothing fits exactly.

I have no time, I'll have to go away, he says, hides his face, I'm frightened.

What of, I say. One blue eye. Loud noises, he says, nothing works out.

He told me about his father. The one who got up so early and stood in the kitchen making his lunch. His son cried afterward, knew he could never make the man happy.

He looked so tired, he was making his lunch and he looked so tired. He worked in a place with loud noises.

LOOKING AT A HOUSE IN SEPTEMBER

Standing in front of a house the idea of geometry seems good. We started by looking at the forest and seeing the straight verticals the tree trunks made. The confusion came when we looked at the leaves shaking in the wind, they'd turned overnight. From green to green and orange. The tree is a birch and it stands by a house. If it's reflected in the window of the house, the window turns green and orange. At night it's black, but if it's green and orange it might be lights inside, it might be that tree.

THE T.V. MOVIE YOU ARE WATCHING GOES SOMETHING LIKE THIS

1. It's raining. Car door opens, woman runs in house. Close-up of Samantha. She has a bright pink face and long red hair. She's stupid, keeps asking where her sister is. Her sister is dead because there's a storm outside.

2. Storm noises: Samantha rushes upstairs. A pine tree has crashed through the bedroom window onto the yellow taffeta spread! She picks up a hair-brush and beats on the tree trunk.

3. A black gloved hand cuts the phone wires.

4. Commercial! Three flat white biscuits rise to golden puffiness. The Poppin' Fresh Do-Boy waves his arms.

5. Bart comes in. Samantha is so stupid she fixes him a drink at the Louis XV style bar. The ice-cubes are green and yellow. "Where's my sister?" she says.

6. Scared look on Samantha's face. Bart yawns. Music builds.

7. Samantha tries to escape in a Country Squire station wagon. Thump the body falls out the back gate. "Susan!" says Samantha. She drives out into the rain.

8. Bart peers into the empty ice-bucket. "Damn," he mutters.

TARZAN PUTS CHEETAH TO BED

-- for Al Ruppersberg

Tarzan tucks Cheetah into bed and gives him his surrogate mother. It is a flannel drawstring bag filled with woodchips and banana leaves.

"Go to sleep, Cheetah," Tarzan says, "tomorrow we go to Cypress Gardens."

Cheetah hoots softly and curls his pink fingers around the flannel bag. He dreams of alligators, sign language, and a swimming pool shaped like the U.S.A. He wants to meet Esther Williams.

THE ANGEL

I found him at Woolworth's in the pet department. He was in a cage with a lot of parakeets, sleeping with his head under his wing. I brought him home and gave him an old bird cage. He went to sleep immediately, shifting around on the perch. He wore a tiny gown of white silk. In the evenings I read the paper and he sat alertly in his cage, looking interested. I never heard him make a sound. At Christmas time I gave him a battery-lit Nativity set and he looked pleased. "What about a song?" I suggested. He looked embarrassed so I went away. On Christmas morning I got up -- not one miracle had occurred! Not a thing. "I'm disappointed," I told the angel in a frank tone. He looked at his feet. "Well, let's not be moody," I said, "it's Christmas!" I cleaned up the house, fixed some chili, and gave him a small bowl with half a Saltine. I turned on the radio and we listened to a jazz version of "Jingle Bells." Then I went to bed, first covering his cage with a dish towel. "Good night, " I said. He was already asleep, a few tomato stains on his robe.

WALKING THROUGH THE BODY

1

Tonight the miners walk down the tunnels, along the tracks. Their headlamps shine, rocks roll off down the dark canals of the ear. They walk past the small black cars heaped with coal, they hear the underground river rushing off to some deep place in the heart.

2

Tonight the band of soldiers is coming home, walking on the thin bone of my leg. One picks up a pebble and puts it in his mouth. One empties all his pockets looking for a slice of bread. The others follow silently, heads down, holes in their shoes.

3

I keep walking toward the mountains, the dunes of white sand. The towns rise up one by one, shimmering like a frame of burning film, and hang in the air. For whole minutes I can see a black sea, flat as paper, but it's not on my map, the map of skin and blood I've brought with me from birth. It's drying away to nothing.

RADIATION SICKNESS

Dreams

the color is yellow, the people sit in the shadows their faces blacken and shrivel beside the big cans of water and crackers marked with the orange triangle I feel the light invading my body my bones leeking the sickness my eyes sinking into my face like hot stones into ice

the color is blue, everything is burning watertowers disintegrating cars with their hoods up blue flames the family inside sitting up straight the radio shrieking the baby on the mother's lap glowing the dog still twitching

Vocabulary

critical mass
fission
mutation
fall-out
flash
blast

Air Raid 1962

second grade they had air raid practice like fire drill but not like fire drill the siren was different a high scream we had to file outside and line up against the walls covering our eyes later on they changed it we crouched under our desks

Comments

"It's no use to hide, we'd fry like bacon." -- my father

"Those of us left would die of loneliness." -- newspaper

"We have enough bombs to destroy Russia and then make the rubble bounce." -- 10th grade History teacher

Mutation, Sterilization

they said crab grass and turtles would survive my uncle worked on Christmas Island couldn't have children I watched science fiction movies things were always born wrong giant crabs Venus fly traps big as houses always the astronaut came back through the time warp to find the twisted jungle, New York melted, or one survivor, his face two red lumps his hands claws the last books in aluminum canisters the Bible, the dictionary

At Night

to lie in bed, the invisible hung weight of bombs overhead the atom splitting fever flashing down the chain, breaking and snapping like cells in a huge brain nerves burning and you see the face crumbling into insanity, the eyes still steady but empty and fixed on yours

THREE CHURCHES

L'Eglise Russe

Clouds of incense, people close together. Sunlight streaming from the rotunda scorching their shoulders, the fringes of a breeze brushing their necks. I stand awkwardly near the back by baskets of crusty bread. The huge pulse of the priest's singing. A river of sound. Someone steps up and puts a flower on a little stand, the heaped white blossoms tremble, God is Russian. I press forward. The priest is far back, framed like an icon. What I'd do to deserve a piece of bread I don't know. The church throbs, a goblet of wine tipped back and forth by a heavy hand.

Baptist Church

Clean faces turned upward when the preacher speaks, down when the hymns are announced. The calm sunlight filters through the congregation, glancing off hat pins, tie clips, bobbing on the wood floor like water. The old people cough, shuffling feet, the sermon a far away drone. When the collection plate comes around I untie the nickel from the corner of my handkerchief. God is big and white, far away. Jesus walks across the water of air and into the Bible, he always looks stern and empty, his robes are blue and rose.

Juarez

Places tourists don't go. In the old adobe church, a wooden Christ lies in his dusty glass coffin. Trickles of blood are

painted on his head and hands. I touch the small photos of dead sons set on top, light a candle and put it in the stand with the others burning in little red dishes. Memories of newspaper stories: wetbacks driven back by the truckload, families freezing in mud huts during the winter, the luminarias on the doorsteps at Christmas. I walk around the church, look into the faces of the painted saints. Do I expect them to speak? They don't.

FOR EMILY DICKINSON

she being too much for life the rare person with no need to travel the countries split their horizons the space inside her felt like death

always a struggle between hunger and surfeit who could have taken a world so charged? out on a walk, the explosion of the chestnut tree the eye blazes blossoms

Her plain, straightforward face. I imagine long skirts, tight-laced boots. Who would think of her as inebriate of air debauchee of dew? She knew the pure high of being, she kept it all her life. What consciousness and the imagination circumscribe is all we need. More than enough.

She stands by the cupboard, putting cups away. She holds the cup in two hands, looking down into it as if reading miniscule script printed around the rim. She stands on tip-toe, reaching for the shelf above her head, and gives the cup a little push forward. The cup falls. She slowly leans down, brushes aside the slivers of china, picks up the handle, turns it in the light.

The snow is falling. She is watching.

A fresh, cool pear on a small plate. She picks up the little

silver fruit knife, puts it down, takes a large bite. She holds the juice in her mouth, swallows and looks around laughing. She writes her brother Austin: you must have pears.

She did not burn them before she died, she did not leave any note to explain their existence. She knew there was a need for them. She felt within herself the amazing vector of eternity and knew it was her own force.

Her last letter: Little Cousins, -- Called back.
Emily

because she knew it her hands were twisting she wondered who was at the door a black carriage jolting around a dusty corner tassels swinging she inside with that genteel bone-man death turning sunsets inside out never a seam to show

she sat invisibly in the cool dark hall the piano was being played she plunges into the dense liqueur the honey comb Home don't surface for air -- at the end that intense sweetness is bitter that white fire frost

GRANDMA'S DAYS ARE NUMBERED

1. GRANDMA SITS IN HER CHAIR, EATING A BOWL OF BREAD AND MILK. Her short legs, wrapped in flesh-colored elastic bandages, stick out, her black orthopedic shoes with the little holes in the toes are buffed to a shine. When she's finished eating she takes out her teeth and won't talk to anyone. Eric gives her a big four-leaf-clover in a jelly jar full of water, says, " I found this on our picnic, Grandma," and she looks pretty happy. But she doesn't thank him, just picks at the fringe on her crocheted afghan. We set her in the sun, next to her favorite window, where she waves to the children going past on bicycles, and looks at The Reader's Digest. Her collection of The Reader's Digest is stored in big Allied Van boxes and placed within easy reach, along with her reading glasses, a box of Kleenex, and Eric's clover. We never ask ourselves if we like Grandma, we wouldn't miss her if she went away.

2. EVERY SUNDAY ONE OF US TAKES GRANDMA IN HER WHEELCHAIR OUT TO THE CEMETERY TO VISIT GRANDPA.

She always wears a black dress pinned with a cameo brooch that pulls it down in front, showing the folds in her neck. She wears little white gloves and carries a purse with a hanky inside, and some change in case she tips anyone. Usually she doesn't talk on the way there, unless it's a few words about Grandpa's way of doing this or that. Eating, for instance: "He always smacked

his lips. It made me mad." or sleeping: "He dreamed about wolves and hit me in the face." When we get there today, she sits in her wheelchair beside the grave and appears to be thinking. A young boy is mowing grass nearby, she waves at him. When he comes over, she says: "Can't you clear away some of the weeds from my husband's grave?" pointing at a few runners of crab grass. Carefully he clips away the weeds, brushes the bird droppings off the little stone, and settles the plastic wreath more firmly in place on its stand. She thanks him and gives him a nickel which he almost refuses. She says to him: "Be sure to be here next Sunday, I'll have something for you."

3. CARLA VISITS GRANDMA RIGHT BEFORE HER BRIDGE CLUB MEETING. "Gotta rush," she says, and takes Grandma's hand. "How are you." She speaks to Grandma the way she speaks to her children. "Now we're nice and comfortable aren't we," pulling the afghan down over Grandma's knees. Grandma picks up a packet of snapshots of Carla's children and spills them onto the floor.

4. GRANDMA HAS A CANARY NAMED ARCHIE.
She used to clean Archie's cage every morning after breakfast, sprinkling white gravel on the bottom, filling the little green cup with Hartz Mountain Treet, making sure the bird had fresh water. Sometimes she gave Archie the yellow tops of celery hearts, and watched him cling sideways while he ate them, looking at her with one bright eye.

Now Archie sits on the bottom of his cage and doesn't sing. He has diarrhea, and his feathers are falling out. We take turns feeding him, since Grandma sits by the window all day. Yesterday, when we went to the cemetery, the boy wasn't around. "Maybe down by the swans," Grandma said hopefully, so I drove her down by the swans. They were swimming around, honking, but the boy wasn't there. Grandma sat in her car with the package of Oreos in her lap and the thermos of milk propped up next to her. All the way home she looked straight ahead.

5. ERIC AND CARLA ARE GONE.

Eric went to Boston to hear Arthur Fiedler, and Carla moved to California with her husband Arnold. Grandma takes Eric's four-leaf-clover out of the water, dries it with a Kleenex, and presses it in the Webster's dictionary.

6. NOW THAT I'M ALONE WITH GRANDMA, I HAVE TO TAKE CARE OF ARCHIE, DRIVE HER TO THE CEMETERY ON SUNDAY, AND PREPARE HER BREAD AND MILK.

It's a lot to do, though I really don't get out of the house much, anyway. Still, when I wheel Grandma over to her window and she absent-mindedly gives me a nickel from the tray next to her chair, I feel bad. I want my Grandma to tell me stories and bake me cookies. But she's saving all her Oreos for the boy at the cemetery, and her stories are mostly gone like the picture albums she left behind. But today, Grandma says: "He

loved pancakes and maple syrup, he could eat a dozen. He ate looking straight down at his plate. We had real butter." She looks down at her bowl of bread and milk. Gnats have flown into it.

7. TONIGHT I HEAR GRANDMA COUGHING AND I'M AFRAID SHE'S DYING. If she dies now I feel it is my responsibility, so I go in and turn on her humidifier. She's lying underneath the blankets and quilt, facing the wall. All I can see is a handful of gray wispy hair. She doesn't turn over but she stops coughing and lies very still so I go to bed.

8. I HAVE THIS DREAM WHEN I GO TO BED THINKING ABOUT GRANDMA. I drive her to the cemetery like always, take out the wheelchair and help her into it. When we find Grandpa's grave, it's filled with water and the swans are swimming around in it. Grandma gives me a nickel and throws Oreos at the swans, who grab them up in mid-air. The cookies turn into large black bugs and Grandma starts crying. I'm filled with horrible anger and yell at her to drink her milk. She clutches the plaid thermos tightly and points to a hill. The boy is walking down it. He offers Grandma his arm. And they glide away, her elastic bandages beginning to unroll.

SHE

The times she cried there was no more home. The dogs hid their faces and slept, the furniture looked old and warped. The dishes leaned on the shelves, and the kettle's whistle sounded like crying too. Her own mother was far away and old, we turned away, helpless.

Impossible for me to think of the day she dies. Rain will fall on the rusted ships in Pearl Harbor, strangers will touch her body. And with us, a great loneliness will grow, a plant with a painful red flower and black seeds.

Fever-damp sheets untwisted when she touched them, icing spelled our names on a cake. Her hands were small and freckled, no rings except the wedding bands. When she put them in her lap, we wanted them to touch us. The dogs climbed up and pushed their noses under her fingers, again and again.

When I look at my hands, they're my mother's hands. The lines on my palm are the history of my family's women, the life line is long. Now, when I write letters or knit, my hands move with confidence. And when someone near me is sick, I lean forward with the glass of clear water, one hand supporting the head.

We came from deep inside her, a dark and weightless place

she carried like a bubble of clear blood. When we put our heads on her stomach, we listen to the noises, and close our eyes.

She signed a form that gave away her body. Her husband wouldn't sign it, she brought it to us, as carelessly as a receipt for a box of candy. It seemed easy to put down the words that made it legal.

Few things kept for herself. At the table, good meat went on our plates, she took the gristle and bone. That's why the jewelry box had mystery, these were her things. The blue velvet lining was creased and stained with perfume, everything was mixed together: cream-colored pearl necklaces tangled with the aqua-marine "pearls" we got her for Mother's Day, a jade brooch next to a cheap Christmas tree pin set with red and green stones. Her fingers pushed the heavy bits of stone and glass she never wore, she looked as curious as us.

In the basement she turns plants from the light so they'll grow straight. She's planting African violet slips, tamping the black soil in around the waxy stubs. Over her head are baskets of hanging ferns, the Christmas cactus that never blooms. The washing machine hums and jumps with its warm load, she leans close to the avocado plant, touches a new leaf with the tip of her finger.

Her anger was terrible. No place to hide, even the corners

of the house pushed us away and the beds were hot and gritty. The food on our plates tasted like sand, the spoons were heavy as stones. Her forgiveness was wonderful: a cool rag held to our swollen faces, a water that touched our foreheads once and felt like a deep stream.

Learning to walk, Father launched me like a boat across a room that rocked and swayed. It took so long to get across, but she grabbed me into her clean starched blouse. Now, when I get on the plane, she stands on the runway and waves. My face is close to the window, I wave back, knowing she can't see. The years instruct me in her gestures.